

BY 2022, 70 PERCENT OF ORGANIZATIONS WILL be experimenting with immersive technologies, according to Gartner analysts. This immediately conjures up visions of people in headsets, the inanimate becoming interactive and environments that “know” you as soon as you arrive. We are being teased that extended realities—a mix of virtual, augmented and mixed reality—are in our future. But that view fails to recognize that technology is merely a gateway to experiencing content.

Extended reality, or XR, definitely has a role in the future of content. Microsoft’s HoloLens, Facebook’s Oculus Rift, Google’s Glass, Cardboard and Daydream, and Samsung’s Gear are proof that everyone is betting big in this space. No one is going to argue with the vision of those companies and, in a real sense, their work will define the coming landscape.

But as the consumers and users of that technology, our expectations for a revolution are probably seriously overblown and at least misguided. I can’t see XR superseding the storytelling mix we already have. Pushing creative boundaries isn’t about replacing what already works perfectly well.

Does the world really need a new way to teach CPR, when existing videos do it just fine? VR may help underscore the risks of binge drinking, but is it likely to do much more good than other approaches? Look, 360 video is fun, but it isn’t doing much more than traditional film. Headsets are improved but still clumsy. And everywhere, producers are adapting legacy narrative techniques, proving they don’t really know what to do with the medium yet.

Remember that period when we all decided we didn’t want to go to Blockbuster to rent movies anymore, but the infrastructure wasn’t yet there for Netflix to stream direct to your home? In the interim, companies mailed DVDs three at a time and let you keep them as long as you wanted.

That’s pretty much where we are right now with XR: the experimental phase of experiential content. XR accessories are being used as a stopgap; we’re in a holding pattern, sending out proverbial DVDs until the network fundamentally changes.

Basically, immersive technology promises two very different benefits for business: enhancing emotional storytelling and improving functional operations. In both cases, however, it’s not the technology but the content being created that matters most.

To be sure, augmented reality is creeping toward meaningful operational impact. By providing floor staff with Google Glasses, DHL is improving package picking efficiency in their factories by 15 percent. Google Maps teams are experimenting with

directions in real-time through your phone’s camera to improve navigation. VW is using a series of virtual reality training modules to increase efficiency in their factories as well. That’s just a taste of what real companies are tinkering with.

But those successes come with an important caveat: They are helping to address human error, or human limitation. To speak the cruelest truth, if you can improve factory efficiency by 15 percent with Google Glasses, you can most likely improve it 100 percent with full automation. Self-driving cars are probably going to solve that Google Maps issue too. The problem these technologies appear to be best at addressing is ... people.

That leaves unsolved the problem of how to integrate XR into communication. How do we respond

Hopes for an “extended reality” revolution are misplaced, says MerchantCantos’ **MARK MCKENNA**, but an immersive future is already in your hands.

A VIRTUAL Reality Check

creatively, in a way that isn’t just replacing people? How do we treat content in a way that makes it more engaging and makes the best use of the technology?

First of all, we need to revise the idea of immersive technology and experience. Eighty percent of Americans walk about with a fully immersive super-computer in their pocket that is 120 million times more powerful than a 1971 Apollo spacecraft. We check it about 50 times a day. And we are conditioned to use it in frivolous ways: to take a picture of our lunch, watch a cat video, “like” something a Kardashian did, call our moms or read an article that is subsequently published in print form. We’re comfortable and secure with that facile view of the now well-established mobile world. But we’ve only scratched the surface of the smartphone’s potential to connect people and ideas. Native mobile content isn’t—or shouldn’t be—just a shorter version of what you once made for your website.

In the same way, XR promises much, but it’s more comfortable to think of adapting, rather than creat-

ing. We're seemingly satisfied with transferring the old ways of experiencing content to the new device, ignoring possibilities native to XR.

Technology offers ways to grow that experience. Over the course of five years, Amazon's Echo, featuring the famous Alexa voice interface, has evolved and so has the content applicable to it. What began life as a smart speaker you could ask about the weather or command to set timers and play music has evolved to an interactive game engine (Jeopardy, anyone?), and a smart home controller from which you can also order a pizza and an Uber.

Echo Show adds a screen that expands Alexa again, roping in visual functionality we're accustomed to on handheld mobile screen and flat-screen TV. Like a well-designed community, the voice-acti-



vated smart-home hub experience will continue to grow organically, often in unpredictable ways, to match the needs and lifestyles of actual users.

And that observation points to creativity as yet unexplored—and not just with Alexa. Every technological innovation opens the door to a complete reconsideration of what should be created for it.

So why, in 2019, does it feel like we're all still waiting on the future—the XR revolution? In part, because that future is a myth. We almost never see sweeping technological revolution. Instead, gradual change leads us to a whole new place. There's virtually nothing we use today that was inconceivable five years ago. But we are conditioned to be excited by the promise of big changes.

Apple's AirPods may be the most overlooked innovation in recent memory. The insight? We don't take them out even when we're not using them. Sometimes we forget we've got them in. As a result, we're more routinely and securely jacked into the mobile device and all that it can offer.

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Recognizing the growing dominance of mobile, Netflix developed technology that allows more efficient streaming and faster response times on mobile devices, for fewer interruptions and a more satisfying experience. They also introduced a download-and-go feature that allows users to watch shows offline, allowing those who prefer to connect only through a wireless network to still carry their shows with them as they travel.

In addition, the company instituted a trial of choose-your-own-adventure programming, presenting a vision for interactive television with the release of its "Black Mirror" movie, "Bandersnatch." I don't know about you, but I'm unlikely to want to press buttons on a TV remote continually as I watch a show at home. But if the movie I'm watching is on a device I'm already holding in my hands ... that's a different ballgame.

The key lesson from all this: Respect the platform. For the immersive experience, the ubiquitous smartphone should be the interface we're focused on, at least for now. Goggles on the factory floor may yet add some noticeable value to a corporate narrative. But used creatively, smartphones can add more, and they can do it right now.

As immersive technology evolves, it will be in the direction of less, not more. Accessories will disappear, making engagement effortless. The future is about being more connected and carefree, to create a more harmonious relationship between user and tech.

5G will increase download speeds and, by removing the lag in data transfer, it actually has the power to change the way we interact with the internet. It will lay the framework for connected products and utilities, self-driving cars and a universal "internet of things." It's another reason we're destined to become more linked with our devices than ever.

Accenture coined the phrase "the end of distance"—to me that's sharp thinking. Immediate adoption doesn't lie in communicating a message differently, but in connecting people. We'll see improved video conferencing tools long before corporate video is enhanced in a valuable way.

Truly immersive content is simple, not experimental. It meets audiences where they are, provides communicators with tools they can actually use and works when it feels native to the platform. Immersive technology will become commonplace when it really helps us do things better.

When we package that technology with automation, we won't be concerned with creating immersive experience; the content itself will become inseparable from the experience. And that's the reality. ♦